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WHAT THE COLLEGE HAS A RIGHT TO EXPECT OF THE SCHOOLS IN ENGLISH¹

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I should like to begin by drawing your attention to the form in which the subject of my remarks is stated: "What the College Has a Right to Expect of the Schools in English;" not, I am thankful to say, What the college expects of the schools. This I should never attempt to answer; first, because I have no authority from any college to interpret its mind on this point; second, because I doubt whether the colleges in general have any clearly realized expectation on the subject. But what the college has a right to expect we may all speculate about, and you and I may as freely utter ourselves on the question as any official or committee or faculty.

It seems easiest to begin with two things which the college has no right to expect. First, it has no right to expect to dictate to the school its whole curriculum in English. I do not say that it has ever claimed a right to do this; but it would not be difficult to point to entrance requirements which imply something very like it. But the claim is obviously unfair, for our secondary schools are not mainly or primarily fitting schools. It is but a small minority of their students who go to college, and it would be unwise to determine the English curriculum

¹Notes of an address given before The New England Association of Teachers of English, November 16, 1907.

by the needs of the minority, unless it could be shown that preparation for college is also the best preparation for the student who goes to work at once. Second, it has no right to dictate the method of teaching. It may, of course, advise, and expect its advice to be heard with respect. But only a small proportion of college teachers have had experience in schools, and they are as a whole not wise enough or experienced enough to be able to claim authority over the methods to be used in another branch of the profession.

Speaking in general on the positive side of our topic, one might say that what the colleges have a right to expect of the schools is that they should bring the pupils to a certain level of culture. Our task now is to define as precisely as may be what this level of culture is. From the college point of view it implies the preparation of the student's mind in such a way as to render it receptive of the information and responsive to the training which the college has to give. This preparation itself involves both information and training, and on these points we must try to be specific.

The pupil should have been taught to *speak*. No part of the preparation is more important; no part is more commonly ignored or more imperfectly accomplished. Boys not only come to college but leave college, who have difficulty in constructing orally a sentence of any complexity or length, or conducting a conversation without slang and with clear articulation. This is surely a matter for the schools, if the homes have not already done it. The colleges have a right to expect that a candidate for admission should be able to speak with fair distinctness and accuracy of pronunciation, to express his own ideas in grammatical sentences, and in language free from the jargon of the streets.

The pupil should have been taught to *read*. By this is to be understood not merely the putting together of symbols and sounds, but the training of the mind to concentrate upon the sense of what is written, and to refuse to pass on until the sense has been grasped. This capacity is often gained by students late, sometimes not at all. In a class in Bacon's *Essays* in Harvard College, I have found my chief difficulty to lie in leading the

students to realize when they have not understood. The great amount of ground to be covered both in school and college is perhaps the reason for the common slovenliness in reading. If so, we should seek to reduce the quantity; but about the necessity for this training in extracting the marrow of an author there can be no question. Reading should also include reading aloud. It is common to lament this as a lost art. Certainly few of my students can read a passage of English prose with intelligibility, force, and a sympathetic modulation. Yet, both as a highly desirable accomplishment, and as a means of teaching and testing the appreciation of literature, reading aloud is of immense importance. It is, unfortunately, one of the qualifications concerning which, so far as I know, the statements of entrance requirements in all colleges are silent. It would be difficult, though perhaps not impossible, to place it among these requirements and to examine on it; but, in any case, it is surely the business of the schools.

The pupil should have been taught to *write*. If the training in speaking already discussed has been attended to, this, I think, is not so laborious a matter as it is sometimes considered. It does, of course, imply further detail. Any statement of college requirements is explicit as to the correct use of words, the construction of sentences and paragraphs, spelling, and the employment of capitals and punctuation. I do not know that anyone disputes the right of the college to demand these things, and few if any schools in New England fail to attempt to supply them.

More debatable ground is reached when we come to the question of literature. There are two parts to this question: that concerning the teaching of literature as such, and that concerning the teaching of the history of literature. On the former of these something has already been implied in what has been said of reading; and to that might be added the explanation of allusions. Here lies the teacher's main opportunity for the imparting of that general information the range of which is one measure of the culture of both teacher and pupil. Clearly no definition of amount can be given here: the important point is that the pupil should be trained to pass over nothing that he does

not understand. The matter of allusions is worth dwelling on for a moment. The pleasure to be derived from an allusion is dependent on previous acquaintance with the fact alluded to. In the absence of such acquaintance, an allusion is not an allusion, but a conundrum. Yet no one can seriously propose to pass it over unexplained. The two great sources of allusion in our literature are the Bible and the classics. Neither of these is known to our generation of students as they were known to readers contemporary with the authors of the chief masterpieces of English literature; and matters are becoming worse rather than better. Clearly then, so far from giving up the laborious explanation of these things, teachers of English have to face the task of making up for this lack of literary background by supplying generously whatever is called for to insure complete intelligibility of the texts read in school. If the labor which this involves for both student and teacher interferes *for the time* with the artistic appreciation, let us say, of Milton, the fault is in the situation, not in the method which the situation makes necessary. Gradually, by such teaching, a background will be acquired, other poems will be made easier and more enjoyable, and in the long run even the poems which have become of necessity a means of training will be returned to with pleasure.

Much the same position must be taken with regard to all the matters contained in the notes to a well-edited text. One often hears protests against "note-cramming." "Note-cramming" is a bad name for a good thing, if it means only the acquiring of the information necessary to make a piece of literature intelligible. If it describes anything else, it describes a stupid way of performing a necessary task. No method is safe with a poor teacher. Our concern is with results; and we maintain that the college has a right to expect that what the student reads in school he shall be taught to understand. As for the direct cultivation of taste and appreciation, vastly important though it is, I believe that no specific demand can be laid down. The teacher with a gift for this may be trusted not to fail to exercise it; the teacher without a gift had better leave it alone. I cannot see

that any college has a right to set up a requirement in artistic appreciation.

In the history of literature, there is no difficulty in making a requirement specific or in examining. The question is rather as to whether there is room for it in the curriculum. But this much, I think, may fairly be asked, that such an outline of literary history be taught as will provide the student with the ability to place in their period and environment the works and authors that he reads, and with some knowledge of their relative importance. Whether this is to be done by means of a regular textbook, or incidentally in connection with books read, may be left to the individual school.

It will be observed that I have given the college a right to expect a great deal that may never be directly examined upon. I think this is as it should be. No teacher whom I am addressing expects to get recognition in examination points for all he does. And our concern here is not with examinations and their remote and helpless approximations. Our programme has permitted us for this morning to concern ourselves with some of the realities of our profession.